

## Hyperreality in Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma*

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The present paper is an attempt to assess the hyperreality of life reflected in Douglas Coupland's novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*. Douglas Coupland is one of the best-selling writers of the contemporary period, who have succeeded in presenting the disaffection of contemporary youths. His novels focus on the traumas of the twenty-something generation, who are trapped in the chaotic situations of the postmodern period. His characters find the implosion of meaning from the lives with the rapid proliferation of media and technology that lead them to feel hyperreality. They find their everyday experiences as an interaction with the simulated version of the world, which cannot present reality.

Published in 1998, Douglas Coupland's novel *Girlfriend in a Coma* focuses on the hyperreality of life in the postmodern society from the perspective of six chosen characters in the post-apocalyptic world. The narrative unfolds the events of the life of its protagonist Richard and his friends who struggle to find meaning to their lives. Karen, who is gifted with the glimpses of divine revelation, sees a frightening vision of future before lapsing into a coma. She describes her vision to her boyfriend Richard in a form of images which reminds Baudrillard's theory of 'simulacra' – a layer upon layer. According to Baudrillard, there is no transcendental figure in the universe that distinguishes real and copies because everything is a manmade copy which distracts the attention from the truth. God is not provider of meaning for him because God does not exist. In this sense if Karen receives images of future, they are merely the illusion of her unconsciousness which she equates with the TV ads of movies. She expresses her vision in the commodified language of a "movie clip" which could not express reality in real sense but a copy of her vision (9). Her vision reveals the lack of meaning in postmodern society, which is unaware about the deadness of life. It also points to the media generated information which becomes an ultimate source of reality that devours its own content.

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After that vision, Karen lapses into a coma sleep, the incident that leads Richard to feel hyperreality in life. He finds that his girlfriend Karen is only alive with the help of machinery. He looks at the world as only an arena which is empty without any dreams. He begins to wonder that the world of bright future, where one can fulfil his/her dreams, is ended and the modern world is only an illusion. It is not his first experience of hyperreality of life but this sense is rooted in his mind since his childhood. Since his high school days, he observed that he, like his all friends, has not an individual identity. He finds the school yearbooks poured with the mishmash of identities, where no one has a unique identity, and begins to question: “At what point in our lives do we stop blurring? When do we become crisp individuals? What must we do in order to end these fuzzy identities – to clarify just who it is we really are?” (31). He finds that their identities are constantly blurring in each other. The question of creating an individual identity arises in his mind. Since childhood Richard attempts to form his separate identity; his sense of identity can be observed when he compares himself with his dead childhood friend and ghost narrator, Jared, and admits the fact that, “Jared was definitely inside the winner’s circle humping himself silly, I, on the other hand, seemed to be on a vague loser track” (6). With the death of Jared, he finds some place to flourish himself but again the brutality of life turns against him. This sensation of lifelessness becomes more bitter for Richard when his girlfriend Karen goes into coma leaving him alone to experience the trauma of life. He expresses his feelings as:

After Karen left, I felt permanently jinxed; I was pulling away from the center. I darkened. My life had the beginnings of a story. I was no longer just like everybody else; the sensation felt wobbly, like jittering across a creek on slippery rocks with wet shoes, the current running ever faster. (32)

It is only Karen with whom he is deeply involved. The feeling of love has filled his life with meaning. Besides her, he feels a little bit closer to Wendy to whom he discloses Karen’s pregnancy. Except Wendy, he finds his hyperreal relationship with all his friends which give him the feeling of being unreal. He says: “Aside from Wendy, there was no one that I could tell who really knew me, which only added to my own feeling of unreality” (49). He also finds both his and Karen’s family emotionless as they are “taking such pains to appear casually pragmatic: *no emotion*” (*ibid*). Only Karen’s father Mr. George McNeil feels somewhat depressed because of his daughter’s coma state. He expresses the hyperreality of

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his life to Richard when he visits the hospital. His experiences of life teach him to isolate himself from his family and involve into the work. He is so busy with his work that he has never communicated with his daughter. He always supposes that he will get a time later but Karen's coma state reminded him how he is wrong. He says to Richard, "I never had a real chance to talk to her, Richard. You know that? . . . Always working. Always assuming there'd be time later." (42)

Karen's coma sleep, birth of his daughter and emotional detachment make him depressed and frustrated. These uncommon experiences make him think about the reality of his life. He finds that all his hopes are imploded as there is no chance of recovering from it. His feeling resonates with Baudrillard's arguments in his *Simulacra and Simulation* in which he writes that the hope is collapsing "because where we think that information produces meaning, the opposite occurs. Information devours its own content." (80) After some years, Richard finds that he is trapped in disillusioned state of life. He wonders as if he were in some kind of coma. He says: "I truly wondered if I was in some kind of coma myself, shambling through life with an IV drip filled with Scotch" (Coupland 70). He begins drinking to cope with the brutality of life. He finds himself living dead walking difficultly alone seeking rest in alcohol. The longing to escape is always present in the minds of Coupland's characters. To escape from the harsher realities of the world, the characters of *Generation X* choose a desert which is without any established values, Tyler of *Shampoo Planet* moves to Europe in search of new meaning to his existence, the characters of *Microserfs* move to Silicon Valley to gain a creativity in their work, whereas Richard sinks into the alcoholic trance and attempts to forget the realities of his life.

Similar to Richard, his friends also choose different professions after completing their school but all of them experience the hyperreality of the modern world. The different professions of these characters separate them from each other and make the experiences of life more tormenting. Linus, who works as an electronic engineer, suddenly leaves his job and moves from place to place in search of meaning involving himself in macjobs. His postcard to Richard reveals his sense of meaninglessness; he writes:

I THINK I COULDN'T SEE ME FITTING INTO THE EVERYDAY  
WORLD ANY LONGER. I FOUND MYSELF DOING ELECTRICAL

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WORK DAY IN/DAY OUT AND REALIZED I WOULD HAVE TO DO THIS THE REST OF MY LIFE AND IT SPOOKED ME. I DON'T KNOW IF THERE'S SOME ALTERNATIVE OUT THERE, BUT I SPEND MOST OF MY TIME WONDERING WHAT IT MIGHT BE. (73)

His sense of meaninglessness cuts him from his everyday routine and places him in the utter chaos which leads him towards the frustration. He has also failed to find an alternative ways to get himself out of the situation.

Wendy has completed a course in medical science and has become a specialist in emergency medicine. The death of her mother and her unfulfilled dream of love during med school makes her unhappy and frustrating. To avoid these feelings, she buries herself into her work which also cannot help her to escape, instead it gives the feeling of mechanical recycling, suffering her from the deadness. As Pamela chooses modelling as her career but she also gets bitter experiences of life. Her profession of modelling shows her the dreams of glamorous world but in the course of the time her dreams were shattered and replaced with the feeling of disillusionment. She cannot hold her celebrity status throughout her career and her modelling lifestyle almost wipes her out. At the end of her career she realises the illusion of her glamorous world which fails to provide meaning to her life. She escapes herself into alcoholism, but it drives her to the death devoid of any meaning. Pamela, who fails to find any value to her existence, asks Richard: "if we were all winners or losers. "Where do we fit in, Richard? We're all working. We all have jobs but . . . there's something missing'" (79). Further, she feels that "there must be a logic" behind their existence in the universe, but fails to understand anything beyond that (79).

Thus, Richard and his friends experience "the ubiquitous *uncertainty* of life in the postmodern era" (Forshaw 40). The bitter experience of all these character's lives unites them once again all together but still they do not think they are having a life. However, though they are united, they still think something is missing in their life. Though Richard has all his friends near, he feels lonely in the world. He sees the dark future in front of him which is never going to change: "I felt the loneliest I'd ever felt, because I was getting old and I was alone and I saw no chance of this ever changing" (Coupland 80). He struggles to cope with the loneliness of his life. Except Karen, he fails to establish any kind of relationship in his

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life. As a result, he cannot find any kind of change in his daily routine. Linus, further, observes that “Nobody believes the identities we’ve made for ourselves. I feel like everybody in the world is fake now – as though people had true cores once, but hucked them away and replaced them with something more attractive but also hollow” (83). From the beginning of the novel Linus is aware about the hyperreality of the life. At one instance, over the comments of Hamilton, Linus exposes the exact situation of their life:

I don’t think you’ve ever had a real conversation in your life . . . When you were young, you were funny, but now you’re not young and you’re not even boring. You’re just kind of scary. When was the last time you had a real conversation with *anybody*? (83)

Linus’s observations put forth the void and meaninglessness of the life of the characters. Though the things are going well, Richard and his friends cannot find the meaning or any centre to their lives. The nothingness in life leads them to drug but it is also helpless for them to come out of their situation. They are living similarly as the everyday world doing job, paying taxes, celebrating birthdays etc. and even though they fails to make the sense of their life.

Karen awakes after seventeen years ten months and seven days of her coma but now her life is merely an illusion. She has missed all her life in her coma. The hyperreality of her life is exactly captured by a nurse, who is serving her almost all these years. She comments upon Karen’s awakening: “poor thing – nearly killed off this time. Back to Inglewood and then what? Better dead than alive. No love, no past, no future, no present, no sex. A sad thing. Half a person” (112). After awakening from the coma, Karen begins to ponder over her life. She tries to stress the mystery behind her awakening. Now she feels that she is not really alive but somewhere in a dream. She remembers the last day before falling into the coma which she has spent with Richard and feels that is the only day she “*was young and alive*” (128).

After seventeen years of gap, Karen also notices that her friends are physically adults but actually they are not. She feels that they are lacking something. She finds,

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[I]n a strange way her old friends aren't really adults – they *look* like adults but inside they're not really. They're stunted; lacking something. And they all seem to be working too hard. The whole *world* seems to be working too hard. Karen seems to remember leisure and free time as being important aspects of life, but these qualities seem utterly absent from the world she now sees in both real life and on TV. Work work work work work work work work.” (143)

Karen notices that her friends and family members are not changed or are the same as they were seventeen years back. She says, “nobody's really changed in seventeen years; they're simply amplified versions of themselves” (156). She finds everywhere people are caught in the meaninglessness of life and aimlessly working hard. The reality of their lives is absent and they are trapped in the TV like sensation which seems outwardly glamorous but in reality blocked with void. She also notices that the lives of the people in the postmodern period are hard which makes them too difficult to live: “There's a *hardness* I'm seeing in modern people. Those little moments of goofiness that used to make the day pass seem to have gone. Life's so serious now” (155). After seventeen years of sleep, Karen notices the sharp contrast in the past and present world.

Karen finds the difference between the past world, which she has left before her coma, and the world of present. She finds the present world full with a lack: “A lack of convictions – of beliefs, of wisdom, or even of good old badness. No sorrow; no nothing. People – the people I knew – when I came back they only, well, *existed*” (215-216). The people are only existed like animals and plants. There is nothing in their life. There are efficient people in the world but they are leading efficiently blank life. Karen tells the traumatic life of her friends to Jared, a dead friend appeared in the form of ghost after the plague sleep of the world, and explains that how they are caught in the void. She says that Pamela and Hamilton continue to drug because they have not any aim and to spend forty years are much for them. Wendy buries herself in her daily routine of hospital, which makes her machine like creature. Linus continues to wander in search of meaning which he has still not got. Megan, Karen's daughter, has become slightly insane as a blind and mental baby born to her. And Richard has placed all his hopes hopelessly on Karen and is waiting for her.

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Jared, who is an external observer of his friends and their environment, finds the lives of people in this postmodern era are like an unsolvable algebraic equation. He thinks that the postmodern society has the same sensation. He also observes that it is this sensation that leads his friends to suffer and forces them to seek refuge in alcoholism: “old friends used to spend their lives blitzed on everything from cough syrup to crystal meth. Anything to make that slobby buzz make a retreat” (250).

After one year of the plague sleep of world, Richard and his friends, who are chosen to survive, cannot make any sense of their survival. They are living with the same trauma but this time only searching for food and in listless gossips or chats. Richard points out their lifeless existence as: “We really don’t seem to have any values, any absolutes. We’ve always maneuvered our values to suit our immediate purposes. There’s nothing large in our lives” (258). However, Jared explains them a divine plan, where they have to achieve a big goal. Their lives are not aimless in the post apocalyptic world. He tells them that their aim is to make aware the world about the divine power in the world, which may restore their faith on God. Thus, the novel suggests that it is impossible to create a meaning to the life in the existing world but if it is possible to eradicate everything that man has created already then only one can find a meaning and purpose in the life.

Thus, the novel depicts the hyperreality of the lives of the characters who are trapped in the disillusioned state of the society. They find the implosion of meaning from their lives in the media generated world that shapes their sensibility and approach towards looking at the world.

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